

Muslim Piety as Emphasized Femininity in Women-Only Kickboxing*

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Abstract

Martial arts and combat sports scholars have demonstrated how the gym or dojo can be a site for renewed articulations of gender subjectivities. Through my study of Muslim women in kickboxing, I have found that articulations of emphasized femininity take different forms than previous studies have demonstrated. In this article, I analyse narratives on sexualities and gendered subjectivities in two kickboxing gyms in the Hague, the Netherlands. I argue that Muslim women in kickboxing emphasize their femininity based on a Muslim, pious ideal, in which they apologetically claim space in sport vis-à-vis men and non-Muslim women. In doing so, they counter Islamophobic and racist stereotypes of 'the Muslimwoman' by playing with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. The strategies and choices with regard to sexuality and gender found in women-only kickboxing reveal how Muslim women contest and negotiate the grammars of secularity underlying sports by performing a pious femininity in a masculine space.

Keywords: piety, femininity, Islam, sport, Europe

Introduction

One rainy day in September, I sat down on a bench in a dojo smelling of sweat and tiger balm, where a group of young women had just started their kickboxing training. After a vigorous warming up of running laps, push-ups and stretching, the students were paired up for the exercises: left-right-left, left-right-left. One person jabbed, the other holding up her gloves with her feet firmly on the ground. The level of intensity between the pairs revealed the level of expertise. Some were talking, laughing, and figuring out the task together. Others only made a hissing sound whenever it was their turn to jab. When the trainer stopped the training with a loud 'OK, time for a break', a young, more advanced fighter whom I later got to know as Ilham¹ sat next to me and took a water bottle out of her bag. A short interaction occurred in which

I complimented her on her style and asked if she participated in competitions. She answered laughingly, but seriously: 'Oh no, I'll leave that to the men! I don't want to mess up my pretty face!'²

Twice a week, Ilham and her adolescent and young adult peers meet to exercise in the gym of an old school building in The Hague, the Netherlands. With the instruction of a kickboxing teacher, they learn how to punch, kick and spar. The 'women-only' kickboxing classes are offered by a kickboxing club that is known for its competitive fighters, including the owner of the gym and his trainers. By contrast, most participants in the women-only training sessions take part for leisure. Some come for the exercise, but few have ambitions to become competitive fighters. Most of the adolescent kickboxers live in the neighbourhood and go to school there. Many of the adult kickboxers start by coming for their

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¹ For reasons of privacy, all names in this article are pseudonyms.

² All quotes are my translations from Dutch.

children's practice sessions and stay an hour longer for their own exercise.

When I first started exploring women's kickboxing, the above interaction with a young woman, who, as I later learned, had been kickboxing for three years, triggered my curiosity to study how women pair the masculinity of kickboxing with ideas of femininity. Ilham's response highlights how she perceived competitive kickboxing as a masculine practice, despite her own involvement and presence in this space in the kickboxing gym. She distanced herself from men and men's kickboxing by not engaging in competitions and emphasizing the importance of beauty as a reason. This female apologetic behaviour in sports, which emphasizes the athlete's femininity as a response to masculine stereotypes, is a much-studied topic in sports studies (Bordo 1989; Hargreaves 1994; Young 2005; Krane 2001; Theberge 2000).

However, as I discovered later, Ilham's choice, like that of many other female kickboxers in that space, to engage only in technique training and not in fighting included religious reasons. The embodiment of fighting-sport skills, bodily comportment, adornment and dealing with pain results in a kind of fighter who is highly gendered, but also pious. Muslim women in the Netherlands legitimize their participation in fighting sports through the ways they dress, walk and talk. They engage in what Connell (1987) terms 'emphasized femininity' in that they articulate their belonging in the sport through their identification with, and performance of, femininity. This research differs from previous studies of emphasized femininity as female apologetic behaviour in sport by including the cultivation of a pious self as part of a feminine ideal. Following my informants' lead, I treat learning to kickbox as religious and gendered embodiment. Through an examination of narratives on sexualities and gendered subjectivities in gyms in the Netherlands, this article reveals how Muslim women in fighting sports instrumentalize particular sexual subjectivities to claim a position vis-à-vis men.

From 2011 to 2013, I conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork, which included immersive participant observation in women-only and mixed-gender training sessions in two kickboxing gyms and interviews with participants, gym-owners and trainers. In this article, I analyse my field notes and interviews to understand the role of piety in the process of emphasising femininity in kickboxing gyms. Piety and kickboxing go together: this may seem like a contradiction to some points of view in the Netherlands, since it challenges the associations between sport and secular modern spaces and stereotypes of the submissiveness of Muslim women, but it is not a contradiction in the everyday life of these women. In this community, the pious, feminine ideal advocates a heterosexual, heteronormative set of preferences for body shape, comportment and adornment. While the women embrace some form of female masculinity (Halberstam 1998, see also Rana 2022a), they are also outspoken against lesbians and lesbianism. I argue that the emphasized femininity of women-only kickboxing includes techniques of the self that allow young women to contest and negotiate gendered and sexual subjectivities, as well as providing a strategy for claiming space in a masculine and secular space.

Kickboxing in the Netherlands

The choice to kickbox is not common in the Netherlands, but it is popular among young Moroccan-Dutch men and women, who are mainly second-generation migrants who have been born and raised in the Netherlands. In the women-only kickboxing classes I participated in, Muslim Moroccan-Dutch women comprise the majority of participants.³ Kickboxing is popular among this demographic because of its proxim-

³ *Kickboxing* is an umbrella term for contact sports that involve kicking and punching. 'Dutch kickboxing,' the style that is generally practised in the Netherlands, developed from boxing, muay thai and karate. Some of the gyms I have studied also refer to their practice as muay thai, Thai boxing, or all three interchangeably. For the sake of simplicity, in this article I use the term *kickboxing* alone.

ity and accessibility, as well as familiarity with the sport through male family members' involvement in it. Muslim girls increasingly take part in sports practices in the Netherlands, at the same time as the growing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands is leading to a secular discomfort (Bracke 2011). Anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic rhetoric have increased in the Netherlands, as in other European countries. Muslim minorities in the Netherlands are categorized as the ultimate 'Other' in Dutch society, and they often have to cope with being pigeonholed as the 'forever foreign' who cannot assimilate to the Dutch way of life. The labels 'Moroccan' and 'Muslim' are frequently used interchangeably in negative public discourse. For instance, there is now an even stronger tendency to criminalize Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth, especially men and boys (de Koning 2020). Discrimination against Muslims has grown in recent years. In other Western nations, such as the United States, there has been a rise in discrimination against Muslims in the form of increased attacks and problematic media representations of Muslim men (Alsultany 2012; Beaman 2017; Rana 2011). Muslim men are racialized as violent, dangerous and radicalized in both the United States (Bayoumi 2015; Garner and Selod 2015) and Europe (de Koning 2020; Korteweg 2020).

However, the racialization of Muslim men does not occur in isolation. The counterpart trope in this discourse racializes Muslim women as passive dupes and as the powerless victims of Muslim male tyranny. They are stereotyped as 'the Muslimwoman' (Abu-Lughod 2016) who must be saved from her culture, religion and men. In this discourse, the ordinary, iconic figure of 'the Moroccan youth' (de Koning and Vollebergh 2019) meets his female counterpart, the *Muslima* (Muslim woman), who is characterized in hegemonic discourse as oppressed and lacking in autonomy (Moors 2018). This dynamic is central to the racialization of Muslims in Dutch society, and it manifests itself in Muslim women's participation in sport (Rana 2022a; van den Bogert 2021). The mainstream Dutch liberal soci-

ety assumes a dichotomy between the secular/modern on the one hand, and the religious and/or backward on the other, giving an implicit superiority to Christianity (Bracke 2011) and whiteness (Wekker 2016). Current secularist discourse in Europe leans on public debates on Islam (e.g. Sunier and Van Kuijeren 2010; van der Veer 2006) that cast Muslim practices as a danger to the European self (Bracke 2011). Several studies have focused their attention on the secular as an embodied mode of living (Bakker Kellogg 2015; Mahmood 2005a; Scott 2009). Following Fadil and Fernando (2015), who argue that 'secularity too includes a range of ethical, social, physical, and sexual dispositions' (Fadil and Fernando 2015: 64), (recreational) sports can provide a lens through which to analyse secularity as a moral field (see also Deeb 2015).

In sum, we can understand sports as a secular space of modern self-fashioning (Guttman 1988; Hirschkind 2011; Sehlikoglu 2021; van den Bogert 2021). The emergence of women-only kickboxing, as well as other women-only sports clubs with large groups of religious practitioners such as swimming and fitness, contests the assumption that sport is merely secular. Historically, Dutch women's participation in sports is seen as a secular, emancipatory achievement, going beyond religious restrictions on modesty and 'soft' ideals of femininity. This also influences views of Muslim women and girls and their (non)participation in sports, which often stereotype Muslim women as not being able to participate in sports due to modesty rules and ideals of femininity, or that sports provide them with the tools to 'break free' from religion and tradition (Rana 2018). Sports clubs that target Muslim women demonstrate that sport cannot be perceived as solely either secular or religious. Religiously inspired women-only training furthermore challenges the juxtaposition of the secular, modern feminist woman versus the religious, conservative and backward woman that is portrayed by the media and in sports policies (Rana 2018; 2022b). Muslim women combine pious and secular sensibilities in such 'non-reli-

gious' spaces, and simultaneously embody and contest secularity through physical practices (Rana 2022b). These physical practices, this article argues, include a performance of piety which is embedded in a specific form of emphasized femininity.

Emphasized femininity

The capacity for physical violence is perceived as the ultimate difference in power between men's and women's bodies (McCaughey 1997). It is therefore not surprising that the participation of women in martial arts and combat sports has often been perceived as an act of resistance to current gender norms. Recent scholarship on women in martial arts and combat sports not only documents the increase in women engaged in these sports, but also how they negotiate gender in these male-dominated sports practices (Lafferty and McKay 2004; Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Hamilton 2020). Women in martial arts and combat sports challenge gender norms by embracing an 'alternative femininity' (Channon and Phipps 2017), which they do not experience as coercive and restrictive. Instead, women's enactment of femininity is experienced as enjoyable and at the same time useful because it challenges sexist ideals of what a 'normal woman' should be (*ibid.*: 32). Women use their femininity strategically to aim for inclusion and acceptance in sports and see beauty as complementary to strength (Davies and Deckert 2020). Feminist sports scholars argue that a global discourse of post-feminism is producing these new articulations of femininity and shaping young women's embodied experiences (Toffoletti et al. 2018: 15). Post-feminism counters previous forms of feminism by embracing normative beauty ideals and gender roles and the agency that women find in it. It displays a preoccupation with expressions of heterosexual femininity that vary among demographics and cultures.

Other martial arts scholars question if this really changes the power dynamics (Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Hamilton 2020). Is this not a form of emphasized femininity that thus

reproduces heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity? In her canonical work on hegemonic masculinity, Connell defines emphasised femininity as 'the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support at present' (Connell 1987: 186-187). The characteristics of this preferred form of femininity always comply with the subordinating effects of hegemonic masculinity.

As many studies on women's sport have argued, emphasized femininity is part of 'the female apologetic' in sports (Theberge 2000). Social sports scholars have long observed and analysed more common displays of emphasized femininity by young women athletes (Bordo 1989; Young 2005; Krane 2001; Theberge 2000). The embodiment of femininity in sport often highlights characteristics that oppose performances of masculinity. Women's bodies are deemed less physically strong and are always judged in terms of cosmetic beauty (McCaughey 1997; Markula 2003). Performing femininities and heterosexuality are more than aesthetic choices: they are also strategies for legitimizing unequal power relations between men and women. The question of emphasized femininity and heterosexuality can be deepened and broadened by taking seriously the various configurations in which it is embedded. The various patterns of femininity have received little attention. Topics such as beauty or its absence, physical strength and sociability are often analysed in feminist sport studies; religion and race/ethnicity are not. At the same time, the question of emphasized femininity, which has been so prevalent in feminist sport studies, is non-existent in scholarly debates on Muslim women in sports (see, for example, (Hargreaves, Hargreaves, and Vertinsky 2007; Kay 2006; Pfister 2000; Walseth and Fasting 2003), and for a critique, see Samie 2018). By analysing how 'women-only' spaces are created, what a pious feminine kickboxing aesthetic entails and how discursive practices revolve around heterosexuality, I show that women-only sessions that specifically welcome Muslim women in a sport that is considered masculine produce a specific

femininity that intersects on the axis of secularity and religion.

Women-Only Kickboxing

Men's and women's competition and training are separated in almost all team sports and many individual sports. Kickboxing, as a relatively new sport, began as a men's sport and remains male-dominated. The first women to engage in combat sports trained with men. Separation replaced this gender-mixed training environment as the number of women participants grew. Kickboxing classes in gyms and community centres that specifically cater to women have increased the popularity of kickboxing among women and girls, the majority of whom do not aim to become competitive athletes. They participate for leisure and seek to become fit, strong and healthy together. Gender separatism is not limited to Muslim practice, but government-led and grassroots initiatives for gender-grouped sports activities, compared to gender-mixed sports activities, have increased Muslim women's participation in kickboxing (Rana 2018).

The execution of women-only kickboxing varies, but in all cases only women participants can join the class. Often the trainer is a woman as well. Some gyms ensure that the door is closed and the window blinds pulled down so that onlookers cannot look in or enter. For some Muslim women and girls in The Hague, sport cannot become an option until it is clear that gender separation is practised very strictly. Male trainers or onlookers would be considered inappropriate or make them uncomfortable. One of the two kickboxing clubs where I trained prominently targeted Muslim women in their online advertisements and offline flyers for women-only training. Mainstream Dutch kickboxing flyers often depict women wearing tank tops and pink sportswear, but the promotional material for these women-only classes markets kickboxing with factual information (where and when it takes place) alongside a small picture of the two trainers in body-covering clothing, portraying a clear alternative for femininity in mainstream

kickboxing posters. The flyers also list the special characteristics of these classes: blinded windows, the absence of men and no music. The first two points relate to the full separation of men and women. The absence of music is a prerequisite for Muslims who believe that most kinds of contemporary music are *haram* (Otterbeck 2008). The list of features is accompanied by a picture of a *halal* stamp like those used to certify food products, to indicate that a product is permissible according to Islamic standards. Although there is no certification for anything like 'halal sports', the stamp highlights the Muslim character of the kickboxing classes. More Muslim women and girls visited the women-only training sessions at this gym than any other gym that I researched. Practicing kickboxing at this gym, with its combination of religious motifs, can be considered an act of piety.

Before signing up for kickboxing, observant Muslims also have to decide whether they want to fight and hit each other in the face. Most men in the mixed training sessions have found peace with hitting each other's faces and hurting one another. They may affirm it by agreeing on the rules and consenting to the fight. In women-only training, hitting an opponent in the face remains a point of negotiation. Most women-only trainers do not let their pupils hit each other in the face because there are often many beginners. In training sessions with more advanced fighters, there is often a division in the classroom. The trainer divides the students into thirds during technical and sparring exercises. The first group only does the techniques and does not participate in sparring exercises. The second group engages in sparring exercises, but are not allowed to hit each other in the face. The third group spars and can hit opponents in the face. The third group consists entirely of advanced pupils, whereas the first and second groups mainly consist of beginners and advanced beginners respectively. However, there are also women who are advanced enough to compete with the advanced students, but prefer not to spar at all for religious reasons; thus, they train with the beginners. Three other

advanced young women join the advanced beginner group because they like to spar but want to avoid getting hit in the face. Their motives are both gendered and religious. Some refer to the *hadith* (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) that forbids hitting another person in the face. Others do not want to ‘mess up their faces’ while kickboxing, or do not want the pain that comes with it. Ilham’s explanation in the opening vignette referred to standards of feminine beauty, but in longer conversations, religious reasonings appear to be intertwined with aesthetic choices.

The women fighters feel they must negotiate the *haram* aspects of kickboxing just as they do other aspects of their daily lives.⁴ Both religious and gender discourses articulate norms and values for women. In this case it is inappropriate for girls to hit each other in the face, and even less appropriate for adult women. Kickboxing women and girls often express their motives for sparring or fighting competitively in terms of their youthfulness or adulthood (Rana 2022a). Some women, including fighters, see fighting as part of being a (playful) youth. As they become adults, they must become ‘more serious’, which may include quitting fighting altogether. Women negotiate the terms and conditions under which they engage in kickboxing, making it halal enough for them to participate. The women-only sessions, compared to mixed training sessions, allow for this pious femininity to come to the fore and to shape it further.

A second gendered difficulty for observant Muslim women is the spectacle that is inherent to kickboxing event when kickboxing. For women who see themselves as pious Muslims, being in the spotlight should be avoided. Compared with other sports, it seems difficult not to attract attention to oneself in competitive kickboxing. Nadia, a professional taekwondoka and amateur kickboxer, pointed out:

In taekwondo, there are six matches in one hall at the same time. There is practically no one looking at you. So, you are only there for the competition. With kickboxing, it is different because it’s a whole show around you: with the music, the lights, the emcee. Basically, you’re showing yourself off.

Nadia does not compete in kickboxing. She and many women do not want to participate in kickboxing events because they do not want the added attention. Compared with taekwondo and other competitive sports, kickboxing is more focused on show and entertainment. Other girls and women mentioned the criminal environment associated with competitive kickboxing⁵ and the consumption of alcohol as reasons why kickboxing events are not the ‘right place to be’ for Muslim women. Others mentioned the ring girls, the entertainers who announce the fighters, often in little clothing.⁶ Most of the male fighters with whom I spoke agreed that fight events are unsuitable places for women. Even amateur and professional fighters who value women’s fights told me that they ‘understand why women don’t go there because it’s not really a good place to be’ or that they ‘won’t let my sister fight at competitions’. Deciding to kickbox is a choice for the girl herself, but it also depends on the negotiation of a whole net of relationships and ideas. At the same time, deciding not to pursue a kickboxing career emphasizes pious femininity and can be understood as apologetic behaviour that enables Muslim women to partake in kickboxing in different ways.

The separation of men and women in sport enables many women to engage in combat as well as other sports and to counter the stereotype of submissive, passive ‘Muslimwoman’ (Abu-Lughod 2016). Simultaneously, the women who populate this space are reproducing their own heterosexual, heteronormative ideals in the form of another ideal, that of the ‘good Muslim woman’. Kickboxing is not a religious practice,

⁴ The men in the mixed training sessions have, in general, agreed to kickboxing and its consequences, and they do not discuss this issue further.

⁵ See Dortants, Knoppers, and Van Bottenburg (2016) for a discussion of this image of ring sports.

⁶ See Lafferty and McKay (2004) and Mazer (2020) for a discussion of the sexualized position of ring girls.

but it allows for the production and performance of pious femininity. This production and performance are mostly based on the informal circulation of religious knowledge, a key aspect in the production of pious selves (Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006). In the following sections, conversations about becoming more pious through sartorial practices and making sense of romantic relationships demonstrate how ways of knowing Islam are shared in women-only kickboxing.

Appropriate kickboxing attire

In women-only kickboxing, self-improvement is a matter of building strength, losing weight and learning how to fight. It also intersects with techniques of comportment and adornment. Like many other sports, kickboxing requires specific attire. Punching gloves and shin-guards are necessary; many pupils have their own, but beginners can borrow them from the club. Kickboxing shorts and a tank top or t-shirt are optional when pupils train for leisurely purposes. The women's attire mainly differs from the men's in terms of fit and emphasizes femininity by using the colour pink. As part of the apologetic behaviour among Muslim women, however, femininity is emphasized in clothing in additional ways.

Modesty in clothes and behaviour is often described as characteristic of the Muslim woman (Moors and Salih 2009; Ünal and Moors 2012), and it is a recurrent theme both during training and in the locker room. The women-only setting enables girls to wear whatever they want in theory, but I observed a 'proper' way of dress at both of the gyms I studied. The tensions between women fighters and what they assumed to be male fighting practices were visible in the trainees' kickboxing attire. Pink continues to be the most popular colour, but it is often combined with black. There has also been an observable growth in women's and 'feminine' clothing in traditional and online kickboxing shops. Some clubs sell clothing and gear carrying their club logos, and they often have a pink variety for women.

The women in women-only training do not wear what the women fighters on promotional

flyers and the internet often only wear, namely shorts and a tank top or sports bra. Soon after I started kickboxing classes in a women-only setting, I adopted the other girls' style of sportswear. In addition to the shorts, shin-guards and gloves, I began wearing leggings and long shirts. When doing push-ups or bending down for stretching, the girls ensured that their shirts were tucked into their shorts so that no part of their mid-riffs or backs were visible. I noticed that other new girls followed the unspoken dress code as well.

Before I participated in women-only kickboxing, I would not have minded showing my legs or my back in training, especially, perhaps, when only women were present. However, after a while I felt uncomfortable showing too much bare skin. It surprised me how easily my feelings adapted to this norm. I noticed that every new pupil underwent this process. The way in which we became accustomed to covering our bodies shows how communal such practices are. Describing her fieldwork experience, Abu-Lughod explains that 'veiling became an automatic response to embarrassment' (Abu-Lughod 1999: 155). Such small actions as wearing leggings under my shorts or tucking in my shirt worked the same for me. In a women-only setting, it might appear that women should not have to worry about the male gaze, but nonetheless they cannot wear whatever they want. The female gaze, the constant checking of each other's clothing and habits, may be just as critical.

Most habitual clothing practices, including covering one's legs and shoulders, were practised without much conversation. When I asked the young women why they dressed the way they do, their answers often relied on religious arguments:

Well, it's haram to show my bare legs, so it's just easier to wear leggings. Because then I can dress in the locker room and my legs won't be bare if there are still any men in the training hall when I enter. (Hind, 14 years old)

Uhm, I think it is written in the Quran, right? Like, we also have to wear hijabs. That's why I don't wear shorts. And, I will also wear a hijab when I'm older, inshallah. (Loubna, 16)

I know people say 'shorts are bad', but I think tank tops are worse. My mother says it's OK if I wear shorts. Also, on holidays I do that. But she doesn't want me to wear tank tops, because then my shoulders are showing, and also my cleavage. (Fouzia, 18 years old)

The girls do not refer to religious scholars, lectures or specific texts in making these remarks. Much of what they know is acquired through word-of-mouth communication. When I asked Alia how she knew what is *haram* and what is not, she referred to her neighbour, who 'knows a lot'. In my interviews and daily interactions with the young women, I saw the role of dress become even more significant. Whether to veil or not was a much-debated topic in the lives of the girls I met. It is a choice that many girls ponder when they are, in their words, 'getting older' and 'more serious'. For many girls, wearing a headscarf is a reason not to engage in competitive fighting. Even though there are cases of veiled Muslim women in competitions in other combat sports, such as taekwondo, both veiled and unveiled young women consider kickboxing with a headscarf 'not right'. Sports competitions are events where secularity is articulated. Religious symbols are in some cases not allowed, and in other cases are at least a rarity. A male kickboxer might bow down and say a prayer before a fight, but when a woman kickboxer decides to compete wearing a hijab, both herself, fellow Muslims and non-Muslims might understand it as a contradiction within the performance of faith, while that is not the case for male fighters. The symbolic power of the hijab, representing submissiveness, modesty and pious femininity in general, shows the tensions between kickboxing and piety.

However, because of the parameters of women-only training, this presumed contradiction did not exist in training sessions. Girls and women explicitly praised each other when they noticed that they had started wearing clothes that cover more of the body, whether that meant covering their hair with a headscarf or wearing dresses down to their ankles. When Amina, a sixteen-year-old recreational kickboxer, put on

a long dress over her jeans after training once, I asked her about the change in her style. She explained that it felt good, but that she was not yet sure if it was a permanent shift in her dressing habits. She was afraid that she would miss the clothes that she was accustomed to wearing. She explained that she would not be able to meet her boyfriend anymore either: 'Actually, it would be exactly the same, but still it feels different. Like if you are dressed like this, you can't do that anymore'. Saba Mahmood argues that we should 'examine the work that bodily practice performs in creating a subject that is pious in its formation' (Mahmood 2005: 160). In her study of the pious women's movement in Egypt, Mahmood explains how a modest bodily form was not an expression of piety, but the means through which piety was acquired (2005: 161). A modest dress that covers more of the body was part of the cultivation of a pious femininity for Amina. It encouraged her to behave more righteously. These trends towards piety reinforced each other, as many of the girls at the gym also visited the mosque together. Some went to Quran class on Saturday, while others attended lectures in the mosque. The trainer, Alia, generally wore jeans, but on Friday she sometimes entered and left the gym in an abaya and hijab. It was what she had worn to the mosque earlier. The first time she did this, I noted the following:

Alia walked into the gym fifteen minutes before her training started. Many girls and women had arrived before her and were already preparing for training: getting dressed, adjusting shin-guards and wrist bandages. When Alia walked in, sounds of admiration and surprise softly filled the room: 'Oh look, it's Alia'. 'Wow!'. 'Mashallah.' She usually wore a pair of jeans or sweatpants and a hoodie or leather jacket to the gym. But this time, Alia arrived in a fully covering Muslim dress, an abaya and hijab. 'People here are not used to seeing me like this', she explained while changing into shorts and a tank top. 'But I went to Friday prayers today and thought, 'You know what? I will just keep wearing this today.'

The women-only setting provided a space for Alia to experiment with a more covert way of dress-

ing. Whenever she did, the other women praised her for her piety and for looking good. It did not stop her experimenting with wearing shorts and t-shirts during the summer outside the gym. Kickboxing helped her tap into a variety of clothing habits. Muslim women see sport as secular, and they may feel pressured to secularize their clothing choices. Nadia expressed how non-Muslim fighters often ask her why she 'still' wears a headscarf. But participation in this sports setting allowed Alia, Amina and others, to experiment with more obviously religious clothing, which also meant experimenting with new beauty ideals. The women did not merely compliment Alia because of the importance of her pious performance in covering her body but complimented her on a particular ideal of feminine beauty as well, one that is based on covering the body instead of showing it.

The negotiation of gendered and religious practices and subjectivities that was apparent in the kickboxers' clothing choices also informed their narratives about sexuality and personal relationships with boys and men. These points of discussion were especially significant for competitive fighters and girls with fighting ambitions.

Heterosexual Emphasis

The young women in this research emphasized their femininity by stressing their heterosexuality and countering the masculine features of kickboxing. They commonly downplayed their physical strength. Knoppers and Elling point out that the media rarely focus on the physical strength needed by women athletes, and that if it is mentioned, the women athlete's strength is compared to that of her male counterparts (e.g., she hits as hard as a man) (Knoppers and Elling 2001: 179). These rote-learned utterances also filled the gym. Women kickboxers stated that they hoped to shape their bodies in a certain way that is 'slim and muscled, but not too muscled'. They train for tight abs but not 'super-defined'. They want to appear 'sporty, but not manly'. They use these standards to measure their peers' appearances as well.

You know, some girls do kickboxing, and they start behaving like a man. You know, like that girl Imane. I don't get that. Why would you do that? You know, she walks like a man, talks like a man. She just looks very masculine. I mean, she doesn't have to wear make-up or anything, but just... I don't know... act normal. (...Silence...) Maybe she is a lesbian. (Hanane, 17 years old)

Hanane expresses how kickboxing and being a kickboxer is OK as long as it does not interfere with the requirement to emphasize femininity. She analyses the appearance of another girl, not by commenting on her looks but by noticing how she walks and talks. She even takes a step further, linking the girl's supposed manly features to her sexual orientation. Making this connection has long been part of a general observable female apologetic in sport (Theberge 2000). Women do not merely emphasize femininity in general; they often feel compelled to perform heterosexual, heteronormative femininities. On the one hand, women and girls embraced a 'female masculinity' that is attached to the sport of kickboxing (Rana 2022a), but if women are 'too muscular', they are seen as 'masculine', 'ugly' and 'lesbians' (Elling 2002; Hargreaves 1994). Many women athletes openly distance themselves from lesbianism and seek to create conventional feminine appearances through their make-up, hairstyles and clothing. Often women feel that, to be accepted as athletes, they must behave in a heterosexual, feminine manner (Elling 2002; Krane 2001). In her research on Pakistani-British basketball players, Samie (2013) analyses this behaviour as *hetero-sexy*. In my research, I noticed that sexual subjectivities were narrated following the same lines of hetero-sexiness. The hetero-sexy talk occurs both during training and in locker-room banter. During training, both trainers and trainees joke about certain movements where the legs should be spread as wide as possible, referencing potential boyfriends and sex lives or making sounds to mimic sex. This space, where women are among themselves, can also enable women to think creatively about their sexual subjectivities, talk openly, gossip, and joke about experiences and expectations.

It appeared that the topics that seemed the most hetero-sexual were related to specific Muslim subjectivities. Heterosexuality, monogamy and abstinence were considered the norm among the regulars at the women-only training sessions, and they were often silently agreed on. The locker room before and after the women-only sessions offered a space in which to discuss these issues. When eighteen-year-old Jamila talked about her boyfriend with her thirty-year-old sparring partner Miryam, the issue of abstinence before marriage in Islam was debated:

Miryam (30): Well, but actually, he should be a virgin as well, right?

Jamila (18): But for the woman, it is more important, because when she's not a virgin, it's a real problem. People don't think the boy's virginity's that important.

M: I know that's what people say, but I just think it's unfair. There is this one rule that applies to both men and women, but only women get punished for it...

J: Punished?

M: Well yeah, nothing happens to him when he screws around, right? And you said he probably does! While, if you did that, he would probably not want to marry you anymore.

J: Yeah, maybe, that's unfair.

Miryam and other adult women at the gym opened up about sexual relationships in and outside of marriage and about having multiple partners. The locker room in this kickboxing gym served as a safe space for these discussions. Religious norms seem strict and rigid from a textual perspective, but the everyday encounters in a women-only space demonstrate how religious and sexual subjectivities intersect:

I'm from Casablanca, the big city, you know, and this already gives you a bit of a reputation. And well, I did try some things in life, like going out and dating. Because I think you should try things. That's how you learn about life. I am willing to be stricter, if it's for a good man, with clothing and all, for example. I'm already more, like, more into studying Islam than I used to be. (Fatima, 28)

Fatima describes her contextual negotiation of the boundaries around being a good Muslim

woman. The process is ongoing and changes with time, space and people. She expects that, with age, a different, more pious and religiously observant subjectivity will emerge. Seriousness, which refers to modesty in this context, is a form of femininity that transcends youthfulness. It is *the* step towards womanhood. Being part of a women-only kickboxing club and engaging with other women with religious common grounds gave Fatima the space to align herself with particular ideals of gendered religious subjectivity.

Conclusion

The cultural encounters that take place in gyms during training and in the locker room produce new articulations of femininity. The juxtaposition between pious and sexually liberated is too black and white, as is the juxtaposition between 'pious Muslim' and secular sport. By acknowledging that gender and sexual expressions can be produced in a variety of ways in everyday practice, this article shows that the kickboxing gym can be a space where women strive to become a pious, feminine self and work on this ideal itself.

While previous studies of femininity in sport have focused on cosmetic beauty and (a lack of) physical power, this article demonstrates that considering different communities of athletic women can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of emphasized femininity. The embodiment of femininity emphasizes characteristics that oppose masculinity. It also contests certain features of hegemonic femininity with the introduction of a more pious ideal. While there are multiple variations in pious femininity in the women-only kickboxing gym, it remains heterosexual and heteronormative in its evaluation of body shape, comportment and adornment. The outspoken opinion against lesbians and lesbianism secures Muslim women a place of their own in a patriarchal hierarchy. Muslim women kickboxers instrumentalize pious femininity to claim a space in sport through an apologetic position vis-à-vis men and non-Muslim women. Sports feminists agree that femininity and the focus on heterosexuality

are more than aesthetic choices: they are also tools for legitimizing unequal power relations between men and women. Emphasized femininity is a form of apologetic feminine behaviour that enables participation in a sport that is characterised as masculine. In this case, women-only kickboxing demonstrates a variation in the pattern of emphasized femininity because of the emphasis on piety.

Women's combining of sexual and gendered behaviours and subject positions demonstrates that the pious self is not only produced in conventional 'religious spaces'. While sports practices and sports spaces are perceived and presented as secular, performances of faith are an undeniable part of women-only sports. Muslim women's participation in sports is embedded in public and political discourses in which their bodies and practices are pitted against the modern, secular way of life. Sports are presented as a path towards belonging to the progressive, secular nation state. For the women who participate in women-only kickboxing, however, cultivating fighting techniques is a way to create healthy, beautiful, *hetero*-sexy but also pious selves that do not pose too big a threat to their male counterparts.

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